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Dance in Canada

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Dance in Canada

by René Picard

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Foreword

I first met René Picard in the summer of 1974. I was then directing the Dance Critics Conference at the American Dance Festival, and the Canada Council had chosen to send him across the border to participate. "What sort of dance critic can someone be," I remember wondering, "who is really a political scientist, a diplomat?" I soon found out. A good one.

At that time, Picard was contributing dance reviews to *Le Devoir* in Montreal. Dance writing, then, was Picard's avocation, a not-so-secret love, and he brought to it a lover's enthusiasm rather than the condescending wit that the expert (or would-be expert) newspaper critic all too often displays.

Now Cultural Counsellor at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, he is, I'm pleased to find, still loving dance and still writing about it. That he should be the one to present this survey of the development of dance in Canada is highly appropriate. His sense of history is keen, so is his eye, and he lacks the ties to a particular newspaper, city, or company that might limit his perspective.

With visits to the United States of Canadian companies and performers as diverse in size and ideology as, say, Margie Gillis and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Americans have become aware of the expanding Canadian dance scene that René Picard speaks of. In the spring of 1984, under the rubric "Danséchange", a group of Québécois vanguardists joined some young American choreographers to present performances in New York and Montreal, and it is hoped that such exchanges can become more frequent.

Having seen most of the Canadian companies that come to New York, and having visited Toronto many times, I thought that I had the Canadian scene fairly well sized up, knew all the important names and who worked out of what city. Yet when I went to Vancouver in the fall of 1983 to take part in another dance criticism seminar, I found that the picture was changing all the time, and that I was way behind. During Vancouver's Dance Week, so many established and emerging choreographers presented works that we rushed from

one jam-packed performance space (like the intrepid Western Front mentioned by Picard) to another. Talking with colleagues from Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, and other cities made me realize that dance is burgeoning all over Canada. The stock is hardy, and the new shoots, as René Picard says, show "great signs of vitality".

Deborah Jowitt

(Deborah Jowitt has been writing dance criticism for the Village Voice in New York since 1967. A selection of articles that she wrote for the Voice and other publications was brought out by Marcel Dekker in 1977, with the title of Dance Beat. Another collection, The Dance in Mind, by David Godine, was published in the fall of 1984. Ms. Jowitt is on the faculty of New York University and has given lectures and conducted seminars in the United States, Canada and Britain.)

Introduction

The development of dance in Canada parallels the fast-paced cultural and social evolution that transformed the country after the Second World War. It also reflects the dilemma that has preoccupied Canadians for over a century – how to establish our own culture, rooted in North America but distinct from that of the United States.

The problem for dance professionals is particularly acute. New York has many of the best dancers and choreographers in the world and, until recently, Canadians often succumbed to the fatal temptation of measuring our achievements against theirs. Now the pioneering period is past and we are beginning to see that professional dance in Canada is unique, a blend of influences adapted to our own aspirations. As Canadian society takes a firmer grip on its environment, the creative Canadian, as Northrop Frye has put it, finds it easier to assume the role of an individual separated in standards and attitudes from the community. This is particularly true for those creators who have established Canadian dance in both its classic and contemporary forms.

This, as we have noted, is relatively recent. Before the Second World War we had to be content with isolated performances by high calibre companies from abroad such as the Ballets Jooss and the Ballets Russes du Colonel de Basil and rare visits by artists, like Anna Pavlova, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey, Fatima, La Argentina, Kreutzberg or Trudi Schoop. After the war came a flowering, though it was not as spontaneous as it may have seemed. The seeds had been planted by our French and English forebears, who amused themselves with social dances in the cities and “folkdances” in the countryside, and in the first half of this century by enthusiasts from Vancouver to Montreal – June Roper, Gwendolyne Osborne, Boris Volkoff, Ruvenoff, Sheffler, Gérard Crevier, M. and Mme Lacasse, alias Morenoff, Ruth Sorel, Mme Koudriadzeff, Elisabeth Leese, to mention a few – who had worked as individuals to bring the beauty of dance to the attention of Canadians.

The federal government played an essential role in the flowering. In 1951, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, known as the Massey-Lévesque Commission, concluded that

Canadians had the strong desire but lacked opportunities for cultural and intellectual lives. Money was the missing necessity, and, on the Commission's recommendations, Parliament established the Canada Council in 1957 with a \$50-million revolving fund to be used to "foster and develop the arts". Much later, provincial and municipal governments also participated in the financing of regional dance companies.

Years of growth

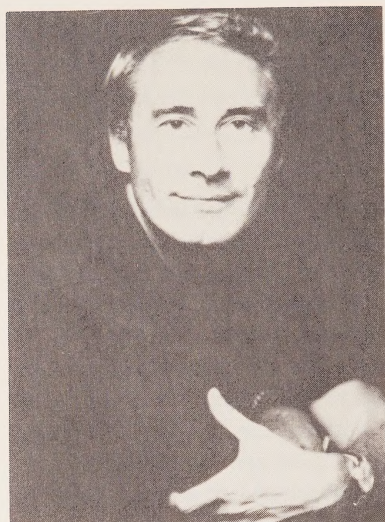
The Commission's report coincided with a surge of exciting, if unfocused, dance activity. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, founded in 1941, had declared itself professional eight years later; the National Ballet of Canada gave its first public performance in Toronto in 1951; and Les Ballets Chiriaeff, founded in 1952 in Montreal, expanded into Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in 1958. In the decades since, these companies developed their own style and personality. They have all established rigorous schools to train young dancers and have made it possible for the best of these to work in Canada. Each has become an important source of regional and national pride and identification.

All three companies were established by foreigners who adapted their traditions to the Canadian landscape in strikingly different ways.

When Gweneth Lloyd and Betty Hey Farrally came to Winnipeg from England in the late Thirties, they decided "it would be ridiculously out-of-place" to recreate European dance in Canada. The small company they founded, the future Royal Winnipeg Ballet, provided home-made dances to entertain a home-town public. Arnold Spohr took over in 1958 and, under his artistic direction, the company has evolved into one that is eclectic in its choice of choreographers, with a distinctive blend of classical and contemporary ballet styles. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet is, perhaps, the Canadian company that is best known abroad since it was the first one to travel; its 25 dancers have visited more than 400 cities in some 25 countries.

When Celia Franca left London for Toronto in 1949, she brought a totally different approach. She envisaged a classical repertory ballet company in the Sadlers Wells' tradition in which she had been brought up, and that is what the National Ballet of Canada's ensemble of 65 dancers has become. Its emphasis on training and technique and its fidelity to the classics are well known. Now, under the artistic direction of Erik Bruhn, one of the great Bournonville-style dancers, the door for contemporary Canadian and foreign choreographers has opened wider. New works by Robert Desrosiers, David Earle and Danny Grossman will soon enlarge the repertoire of this fine company and will join those of Constantin Patsalas, resident choreographer, and of James Kudelka, who choreographed a number of works for the National Ballet of Canada before he joined Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

Ludmilla Chiriaeff, a Latvian who had lived in Berlin and Switzerland and who had been trained in the Russian tradition, formed a small troupe in



Arnold Spohr



Celia Franca

Ludmilla Chiriaeff



Betty Hey Farrally



Montreal in 1952 to perform on the new medium of television. They became Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, a company that, like the National Ballet, emphasizes training. Its repertoire, however, is mostly twentieth century with an emphasis on contemporary North American works, and it vigorously seeks out new choreography, notably from its resident choreographer James Kudelka. It is now run by a triumvirate, a new approach in artistic direction by committee. Les Grands Ballets was the first Canadian ballet company to tour the Republic of China and the Orient, in May 1984.

Modern dance

The three companies have survived the first critical 25 years; along the way they have earned international reputations and produced such exceptional dancers as Martine Val Hamel, Karen Kain, Frank Augustyn, Nadia Potts, Evelyn Hart, Kevin Pugh, David Peregrine, Sylvie Kinal and Serge Lavoie among others, all medal winners at Varna or Moscow. Outstanding Canadian choreographers, however, have been more difficult to find, with the established exception of Brian MacDonald, Fernand Nault and Ludmilla Chiriaeff. James Kudelka's recent works suggest that he may well match or, conceivably, surpass their efforts. On the other hand, in modern dance, a talented young generation of creators is succeeding the first generation of teachers and artists. Modern dance, by definition, is oriented towards solving new problems and this appeals to this new generation concerned with social implications. For this reason, it may have inspired more authentic and remarkable works.

It is amusing to imagine a Canadian ballet company integrating the strong points of the three existing groups: diversity and variety to attract a large audience and to reflect today's world; technical mastery and flair to dance the classics; and excellence of training to ensure continuity from one generation to the next. This is the challenge facing the ballet companies, and an exceptional Canadian choreographer could become the catalyst through which this dream could materialize.

Pioneers of modern dance

While ballet was fermenting in the Forties, Canadian modern dance was being born. One of the pioneers was the Québécoise, Françoise Sullivan, who trained in ballet as well as modern dance in Montreal and then studied in the New York studio of Franziska Boas, daughter of the famous anthropologist. Influenced by Boas, she developed a new concept of dance closely linked with the Quebec avant-garde, the painters Borduas, Riopelle, Leduc, Claude Gauvreau, Pierre Gauvreau the writer, and a host of art-oriented intellectuals. In 1948,



*Evelyn Hart,
The Royal Winnipeg Ballet*



*Veronica Tennant and Frank Augustyn,
The National Ballet of Canada*



*Annette av Paul and Aleandre Belin.
Les Grand Ballets Canadiens*



*The Company,
Toronto Dance Theatre*



Françoise Sullivan

Sullivan summarized her original views on dance in a lecture emphasizing the role of the unconscious and assigning a new role to the law of gravity: "*La loi de la gravité est un autre facteur considéré dans la danse. Le danseur joue avec sa pesanteur pas les chutes, les sauts, par l'équilibre, par le seul fait de se tenir debout, par le vacillement, le vertige etc. Il peut, poursuivant son désir, se faire très lourd ou très léger, non pas par des artifices tendant à échapper aux lois de la nature, mais dans l'utilisation harmonieuse de ces lois.*" (The law of gravity is another element considered in dance. The dancer plays with his weight in his leaps and falls, in his balance, in his sways, in his spins and by simply standing upright etc. He

can, if he wishes, make himself very heavy or very light – not by using tricks designed to escape the laws of gravity but by using those laws harmoniously.)

The lecture was published by Borduas in his *Refus-global*, the manifesto signed and supported by many artists who championed individual freedom and who would become a milestone in the evolution of modern Quebec. "*Place à la magie, place aux mystères objectifs, place à l'amour, place aux nécessités*" was the new artistic credo. (Make way for magic! Make way for objective mysteries! Make way for love! Make way for necessities.") As a result of this manifesto, Borduas, the leader of the revolutionaries, lost his teaching job at the École du Meuble of Montreal.

Sullivan made her statement explicit in 1948 with her solo, "Dance in the Snow", which was filmed outdoors in St-Hilaire, Quebec. As Martha Graham integrated geographical space into art in her 1935 work "Frontier", Sullivan in her solo, made an icy, snowy plain an integral part of her dance; to dance with snow boots and a wool cap was not run-of-the-mill in Quebec in those days.

Although Sullivan has never had her own company, her influence has been considerable. Many of today's prominent Montreal dancers and choreographers, like Paul-André Fortier, Ginette Laurin and Daniel Léveillé, to name a few, would acknowledge their debt to her.

Jeanne Renaud, Sullivan's friend, now a consultant on arts programs at the University of Quebec in Montreal, studied in New York with Hanya Holm,

at the suggestion of her Montreal teacher, Elisabeth Leese, and also with Mary Anthony. When holidaying in Montreal, Sullivan and Renaud worked together to present performances of dance. When Jeanne Renaud followed her husband to Paris, she befriended a group of expatriate Canadian artists, among them Françoise and Jean-Paul Riopelle. After returning to Montreal, Jeanne and Françoise established a modern dance group before Jeanne founded Le Groupe de la Place Royale, named after its first address in old Montreal. Le Groupe de la Place Royale was the first modern dance company subsidized by the Canada Council.

The company developed quickly along Renaud's idea of the integration of the arts. Many Quebec artists, painters, sculptors, musicians and film-makers found an outlet for their talent there. Some years ago even dancers' voices became part of the performance. After Jeanne Renaud retired in the mid-Seventies the company was co-directed by her assistant Peter Boneham, and the young choreographer Jean Pierre Perrault. Perrault, a Montrealer, was a first-generation product of Le Groupe de la Place Royale and the first Quebec male dancer in modern dance. In 1977, the company moved to Ottawa. At that time some of its early dancers like Maria Formolo and Francine Boucher were pursuing careers of their own in Edmonton and Halifax, breaking new ground in modern dance.

In the rest of Canada, modern dance never had such roots and it developed along very different lines.

About 1967, Patricia Beatty, a Canadian who had studied at Bennington College, Vermont, United States and at Martha Graham's school, returned home to start the New Dance Group of Toronto. The next year, she joined Peter Randazzo, who had danced with the Graham Company in New York, and David Earle of Toronto, to found the Toronto Dance Theatre. Deeply influenced by the Graham the style in the early years, the company now widely performs the works of its three founding directors and those of the resident choreographer, Christopher House.

Rachel Brown came to Winnipeg from the United States in 1957 to join the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. In the mid-Sixties she brought together a group, the Contemporary Dancers, which, in 1970, became a new professional company in the city, confirming a strong interest in Western Canada in dance of all styles. Bill Evans is now the artistic director.

In 1972, the Anna Wyman Dance Theatre appeared professionally in Vancouver. With her disciplined dancers, Wyman, a disciple of Mary Wigman, has been searching for a new choreographic vocabulary. Her precise dances, often successfully integrating works of art, depict the anguish and energy of today's world. The Anna Wyman Dance Theatre was the first modern company to perform in the People's Republic of China.



Anna Wyman

Companies have continued to sprout up across the country – Paula Ross' Dance Company, Danny Grossman's Company with its athletic ability and joyful spirit, the Dancemakers in Toronto, the Theatre Ballet of Canada, the Alberta Ballet, the very popular Ballets Jazz in Montreal, Desrosiers Dance Theatre, Karen Jamieson Dance Company, and Danse Partout, among others. Only a few have failed to survive and a fundamental dynamism remains. Of those companies that have faded, worth mentioning is the Groupe Nouvelle Aire; out of it came some of Montreal's most innovative current choreographers and dancers like P.A. Fortier, Daniel Léveillé, Ginette Laurin and Edward Locke.

From 1974 to 1980, Fifteen Dance Laboratorium, headed by Miriam and Lawrence Adams, was instrumental in developing freedom of expression in modern dance in Toronto. In Vancouver, the Western Front, and Terminal City Dance Research, have been stimulating nests of creativity in dance. Almost simultaneously other groups have started to appear all over the country, presenting many diversified trends in dance as a living art form.

Jean-Pierre Perrault, who left Le Groupe de la Place Royale to work on his own in the early 1980s, joined a new breed of independent choreographers. He believes that, "some dance styles are better served by permanent structures, but when it becomes an institution a company can swallow the time and liberty of the artist, it can become a yoke around his neck". Preferring to work with non-professional dancers and to use a vocabulary made up of the simplest archetypes, Perrault appreciates his new freedom. He is one of our most adventurous contemporary creators, and is presently evolving through a Kurt Weillian mood. A recent work, for instance, in which the dancers all wear grey felt hats, large coats and laced boots, permits no distinction between male and female and reflects his preoccupation with today's society. Susan Cash and Phyllis White in Toronto, Margie Gillis and a number of young choreographers in Montreal, have chosen to take similar independent roads.

Other choreographers like Paul-André Fortier, Daniel Léveillé and Edward Locke (whose dance titles are already a program) find the structure of a company preferable for creating and touring.



Joe,
Choreographer, Jean-Pierre Perrault

Training facilities

One of the most vital aspects of the dance explosion in Canada has been the rapid development of facilities for training young dancers. In addition to the National Ballet School, an independent institution often praised as one of the best in the world, the schools attached to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and those of the modern dance companies, are the dance programs offered by the major Canadian universities. A few, notably York in Toronto, Simon Fraser in Vancouver and, more recently, the University of Quebec in Montreal which is focusing on integration of the arts, have earned a reputation for excellence. Summer schools, like the Banff Centre established in 1946, and other newer ones like Quebec Été-danse in Lennoxville, play a positive role. Private dance schools, which give young people their first opportunity to dance, have also multiplied in recent years.

A significant change on the part of the general public has also taken place since the early Sixties. Today, no one needs to explain his interest in dance.

Almost all of Canada's cities have facilities for dance performances; the Premier Dance Theatre at Harbourfront in Toronto, the first theatre exclusively reserved for dance, opened in September 1983. An inventory of the technical dimensions of most of the locations is maintained by the Touring Office of the Canada Council, greatly facilitating the logistics of touring. Trade magazines like *Dance in Canada*, and regional ones like *Re-Flex-Dance* and *Vandance* ensure communication among dancers and help to overcome the limited space given to dance in most Canadian newspapers.

Dance does explore more than esthetic questions; at the same time, if it had been only a kinetic problem it would have disappeared long ago.

Rilke expressed this where he said, "*Mais dites-mois qui sont-ils ces acrobates qui passent insaisissables un peu comme nous face à nous-mêmes?*" ("But tell me, who are those elusive acrobats who pass before us a little like us face-to-face with ourselves?")

As an evocation of elegance past, a statement of ethnic pride, a non-verbal commentary on today's society or pure research on movement and energy, dance enriches our perception and reveals itself a potent means of communication.

It is interesting to note how the newly-acquired wealth of the oil-rich West and the excitement of the pre-referendum period in Quebec have helped bring to life new dance companies with a deep sense of creativity and independence. The well established schools of thought in ballet and modern dance are losing their heroic impact; as the first stages of development come to an end, dancers and choreographers are confidently exploring new avenues of expression. The dance world in Canada is one in constant evolution and one which shows great signs of vitality.

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NOTE: Max Wyman, the noted dance critic and historian, is working on *A History of Dance in Canada*, to be published by Irwin Publishers next spring in Toronto.

National Film Board dance films:

Gala

Adam Symansky
John N. Smith
Michael McKenniery

For the Love of Dance

John N. Smith
Michael McKenniery
Cynthia Scott
David Wilson

Flamenco at Five Fifteen

Cynthia Scott

Narcissus

Norman McLaren

Pas de deux

Norman McLaren





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